

Failure v. Success: The Grading System & its Effect on Student Perception of Success

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Abstract

Many students experience a seemingly direct correlation between their grades and their overall success. This report seeks to understand the magnitude to which students attribute grades to our overall success and how the grading system alters our perception of it. In addition, this report aims to elucidate a different approach to education that favors the acquisition of knowledge (or actual learning) over the socially constructed rating system set in place (grades and rank). All in all, this report aspires to present a new perspective for students that will redefine their determinants for success and overall fulfillment within a post-secondary institution.

Keywords: grading system, learning, success

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“You have the right to remain silent. Any class you take can and will be used against you in an office of the registrar. You have the right to an academic resource. If you cannot afford an academic resource, one will be provided for you. Do you understand the rights I have just read to you? With these rights in mind, do you wish to speak to me?” – Officer GPA. The Defectum Rights.

If a student failed to meet the academic standards set by a community of scholars, has that student failed to meet the standards for success overall? This question investigates the perception of success and how we as a collegiate society often define it. Simply put, there is a system set at the elementary level that rewards high marks with recognition and punishes low marks with fewer opportunities. Ultimately, students are left with a tough decision to make: become fixed minded and settle into a predetermined, standardized form of success or become deep learners able to expand their understanding, but at the expense of immediate achievement and other opportunities.

In either decision, a student must forfeit a valuable asset to their success overall. However, since there is a demand to be successful as soon as possible, many students are not concerned with the long-term issues that plague an individual with a fixed mindset. Many would rather flock to the former choice in order to experience a success that the majority of society would deem acceptable. In the academic world, this form of success is measured by what students and educators know as grades. Thus, in order to meet the immediate demand to be successful, students will identify themselves and their success based upon the standard that is set in place—the grading system.

From this, the question becomes to what extent has the grading system restructured the perception of success in undergraduate students? What do success and failure truly mean and how can students overcome feeling the need to fit within the parameters of societal standards?

Methodology: Due Process of Academics

This issue of the grading system and its troubling effect on how students perceive success can be evaluated through the use of an international inquiry process known as photovoice. Photovoice is a research technique that aims to examine community development by combining photographs with rigorous content analysis of a situation. It specializes at providing insight into the marginalized perspectives of those who often challenge conventional opinions (Wang, 1997). Ultimately, this process can be used to enact change within the community and promote academic justice for all students within the educational system.

Deprived of Opportunity

Picture this: there is an African-American male sprawled across the pavement. His right cheek is scarred red from the dirt. His white shirt is stained grey from the gravel. Picture his arms folded behind his back. Imagine that his body is immobilized and limited to an occasional twitch. Now, erase the extra details that weren't given. Erase the police officer pinning him down. Erase the handcuffs around his wrists. Recall the pain and the strain of his muscles to maintain that position, but erase the firearm strewn aside from his possession. Instead, replace that firearm with a bookbag. Notice how the contents of that bookbag are thrown all around him. To his left there are books; to his right there are notebooks. Imagine that there is something written on his left palm. Examine it closely. Do you see the red 'C-' written there? Here lies a student who failed to meet the standards set by the community of scholars. And like any dominant system, this one will punish and arrest those who fail to meet its standards.

Literature Review: The Appeal to an Understanding

In the introduction, a modified version of the Miranda Rights (in the form of the Defectum Rights) was created in order to express the similarities between grades in the grading system and laws in the legal system. Like laws, grades represent a standard that every student must abide by in order to be successful. If an individual does not meet a requirement within either system, then he is given a suitable punishment. In the legal system, multiple rules make up one type of law. Likewise, a student's grade is determined by numerous factors.

Briefing: What is a Grade?

Surely it is fair to say that if a student has the right to receive a grade, he also has the right to know what that grade means. One definition of a grade could be "a label placed upon a student's work or achievement" (Quinn, 2013, p. 5). However, like laws, grades can be interpreted in numerous ways by the assessor. If grades are used to assess student learning, then the slight differences between them become crucial for final results. This is because one type of grade may report a result completely different from another type a grade. So, what are the different types of grades?

According to the research-based publication, *On Grades and Grading: Supporting students through a more transparent and purposeful use of grades*, by Timothy Quinn (2013), an English and Philosophy professor, there are five main types of grades. Professor Quinn provides a general skeleton of what a grade could represent and lists the different variations within a table. Displayed in *Appendix I* is a version of that table.

Using this general definition as a template, professor Quinn went on to explain that there are three elements that define a grade: the type of information, the topic of information, and the context for that information. The type of information represents the form that a grade can take

based upon its action specifically. For example, if a grade is quantifying, then it would be a numerical type of grade. The topic of information represents the ‘what’ and the ‘when’ of a grade. The ‘what’ refers to a student’s skill level or progress while the ‘when’ refers to the period of time over which the ‘what’ has been measured (Quinn, 2013, p. 9). The context for the information represents the meaning behind the grade and why it is significant. This element is the most important part of a grade because it serves as the standard in which the students are measured against. Without the context, the surface level types of grades would become meaningless due to the lack of depth into each student’s actual rate of retention and performance.

The Grading System and its Abuse of Power

Overall, Timothy Quinn (2013) generally defines a grade as “a piece of information that attempts to report something about a student’s education” (p. 5). However, this presents a troubling question: if every type of grade is different, how can they still measure the same amount of student learning? That’s just it, they don’t. Not every form of grade has the capability to fully divulge a student’s learning and academic productivity. The community of scholars believe that every type of grade can demonstrate a student’s full understanding and retention of the material. In reality, some grades only report what has occurred on the assessment (Quinn, 2013). For example, getting three out of four questions correct on an exam will still quantify as 70% no matter how hard the questions were. Ending the semester with an 80% in a class will still translate as the letter grade ‘B’ whether the student was in the honors section or not. This phenomenon leads students to believe that no matter the quantity or the difficulty of material they learn, all that matters at the end of the semester is the grade and the GPA.

Martin Luther King Jr. also addresses this issue within his article titled “The Purpose of Education”. His position was that education must enable man: to become more efficient, to

achieve the legitimate goals of his life, and to train him for quick, resolute, and critical thinking (King, 1947, p. 1). Above all, Dr. King believed that the ultimate purpose of education was to save man from the “morass of propaganda.” If man is released from the “legions of half-truths, prejudices, and propaganda,” then he will be enabled to think for himself and to become a man set for utility and culture (1947, p. 1).

He also notes that students develop a misunderstanding of what education means and what its purpose truly is. To some, education is a battlefield where students only use the tools that are absolutely necessary to “forever trample over the masses” (King, 1947, p. 1). To others, education becomes a pageant where only the most accredited students of honor and nobility triumph. In both cases, students must focus solely on what is absolutely necessary to succeed at the moment. From this, the grading system and its dictatorship over education become confirmed with each class and with each grade. Like any dictatorship, this system governs its students by setting an absolute standard that cannot and will not be challenged. Like any dictatorship, this system determines what is acceptable and serves as the judge between success and failure. Like any dictatorship, this system favors that which is standardized over that which is academically unique. Thus, it becomes clear that any system that stops at efficiency may prove to be the greatest menace to society because it works to create students with reason, but with no understanding (1947).

Learning De Facto

Some students believe understanding is the development of one’s memory and to become extremely skillful at the techniques that are taught. Others believe that understanding is a standard that can be systematically measured and estimated for. However, few believe that it is “the discovery of the dynamic power of the mind” (Bain, 2012, p. 4). These interpretations of

understanding are what Ken Bain sought to recognize in his publication, *What the Best College Students Do*. Ken Bain, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at the University of the District of Columbia, believed that students often take one of three approaches to understanding. These approaches are categorized into three different types of learners: surface, strategic, and deep. Simply put, surface learners are the students who seek only to survive and get through to the next class. They perceive education as a battlefield and are only concerned with what will keep them alive. Strategic learners are the students who seek to be furnished with the greatest of honors and achievements. They are the students who perceive education as a pageant show and would rather receive recognition than actually fulfill a purpose.

In contrast, deep learners are different. They seek discovery and functionality at the expense of acknowledgment. Deep learners seek to grow beyond what is necessary and define their success by the journey they take. Within this system, deep learners are problematic because, like criminals, they often challenge the standard and garner the information they find valuable. Not for success. Not to be seen. Such properties are not of value to them. What's important is that they increase their understanding of the information. John B. Bader agreed with this approach to education in his research-based publication, *Dean's List: 11 Habits of Highly Successful College Students*. In fact, the first habit introduced stated that students should focus on learning, not on grades. He proposed the idea that success should not be based upon the measurements of an exam, but upon whether or not the student has become a learned individual (Bader, 2011). If a student values his education, and he has been allowed to explore the material for what it is, then he can identify himself and his worth without needing a warrant from a grade.

The Defendant – Failure

The fact of the matter is, most students can't risk defying the system otherwise they will receive a lower grade and the punishment that comes with it. For most, getting arrested is simply not an option. Likewise, failing academically could mean the end of any number of opportunities. In any dictatorship, fear is the number one motivator. Hence, the fear of failing becomes a student's motivation to abide by the standard. When it comes to grades and education, both educators and students believe that failure must be absolute. If a student is given an opportunity to redeem himself, then it is believed that failure was not actually enforced (Quinn, 2013). This interpretation of failure supports a system that aims to reward high grades with recognition and to punish low grades with fewer opportunities. In actuality, this interpretation of failure does not relate to the real world. In life, failure is not absolute but rather a setback. Thus, to interpret failure as a setback implies that failure can also be overcome.

The Defendant's Testimony

"What I am saying to you this morning my friends [is that] if it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures. Sweep streets like Beethoven composed music. Sweep streets like Shakespeare wrote poetry... If you can't be a highway, just be a trail. If you can't be a sun, be a star. It isn't by size that you win, or you fail. Be the best of whatever you are. And when you do this, you've mastered the length of life." – Martin Luther King Jr., *"What is Your Life's Blueprint?"* (King, 2013).

In this speech featured in the publication *A Time to Break Silence: The Essential Works of Martin Luther King, Jr., for Students*, Dr. King points out that in life not everything is fair. The decision of an admissions committee or the verdict of a judge will not falter. In the end, it is through the tenacity of the individual that will determine his worth and value. The instant

gratification of a student who sought out recognition and remained fixed minded in fear of failure dissipates after graduation day. But the student who embraced failure and sought out understanding despite recognition will know a fulfillment and a worth that will last far beyond the classroom.

Conclusions & Recommendations: Disclosure Statement

Remember the African-American male sprawled across the pavement. Remember his arms folded behind his back. Remember that he failed to meet the standards set by the society. Now, forget the deceptive details of his arrest. Forget the value of his GPA. Forget the letter grades that restrained him. Recall his potential to learn and grow but forget the standards that he failed to meet. Remember that he is a student, not a criminal.

According to the U.S Department of Education (1980), the overall purpose of the academic system is “to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.” But it is impossible to nurture chained hands. It is impossible to promote the achievement of a felon. When the system defines its’ students by a predetermined standard equal access becomes unattainable. If grades are about standards and standards imply judgement, then the lesson for every student is to abide by the law of grades or be deprived of opportunity (Yale, 1970). Ironically, this type of system does not meet the standard for success.

The better system is the one built for construction, not destruction. In order for students to truly be supported in an academic setting, no matter the context of their story or limitations, the system set in place must value the development of each student more than identifying them as academically acceptable. Essentially, this means that the system must support student learning by providing sufficient motivation and helpful feedback on student work. It should express a

greater emphasis on student learning while providing a clear and transparent classification of what each grade represents (Quinn, 2013). Building learned individuals takes more than quantifiable data. It takes sincerity. Students are not criminals. Students are not numbers. Students are learners capable of growth if provided the necessary resources.

Reflection: The Verdict

Understand that I am a student seeking to find my purpose. I seek to learn and grow as a cultivated individual. Understand that I do not, nor does any other student, plan to become inadequate. I believe that, after failure, never getting another chance to try is the greatest fear of any student. I feared that I would never meet the standard for success in this system, because of the blunt reality that is the color of my skin. How could I grow in a system that I was never meant to be a part of?

The answer, although contradictory, was not to remain silent. Anything and everything I say or do can be used to my advantage against the standard. Through the use of photovoice research and determination I have created my own opportunity to grow. Through this experience I have approached my education from a perspective that seeks to understand rather than to be acknowledged. And because of this I realized that, despite the challenges to make it to college, I am on campus. Despite the failures and setbacks along the way, I have reached new heights within my education. If I managed to avoid becoming a number in a cell before, why should I become a number in a classroom now? Why let a grade define me? My success is determined by the goals that I have set and is therefore only limited by my own self-conviction. Consequently, I commission my fellow students to learn and grow in order to fulfill a purpose, not to fulfill a standard.

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Tables

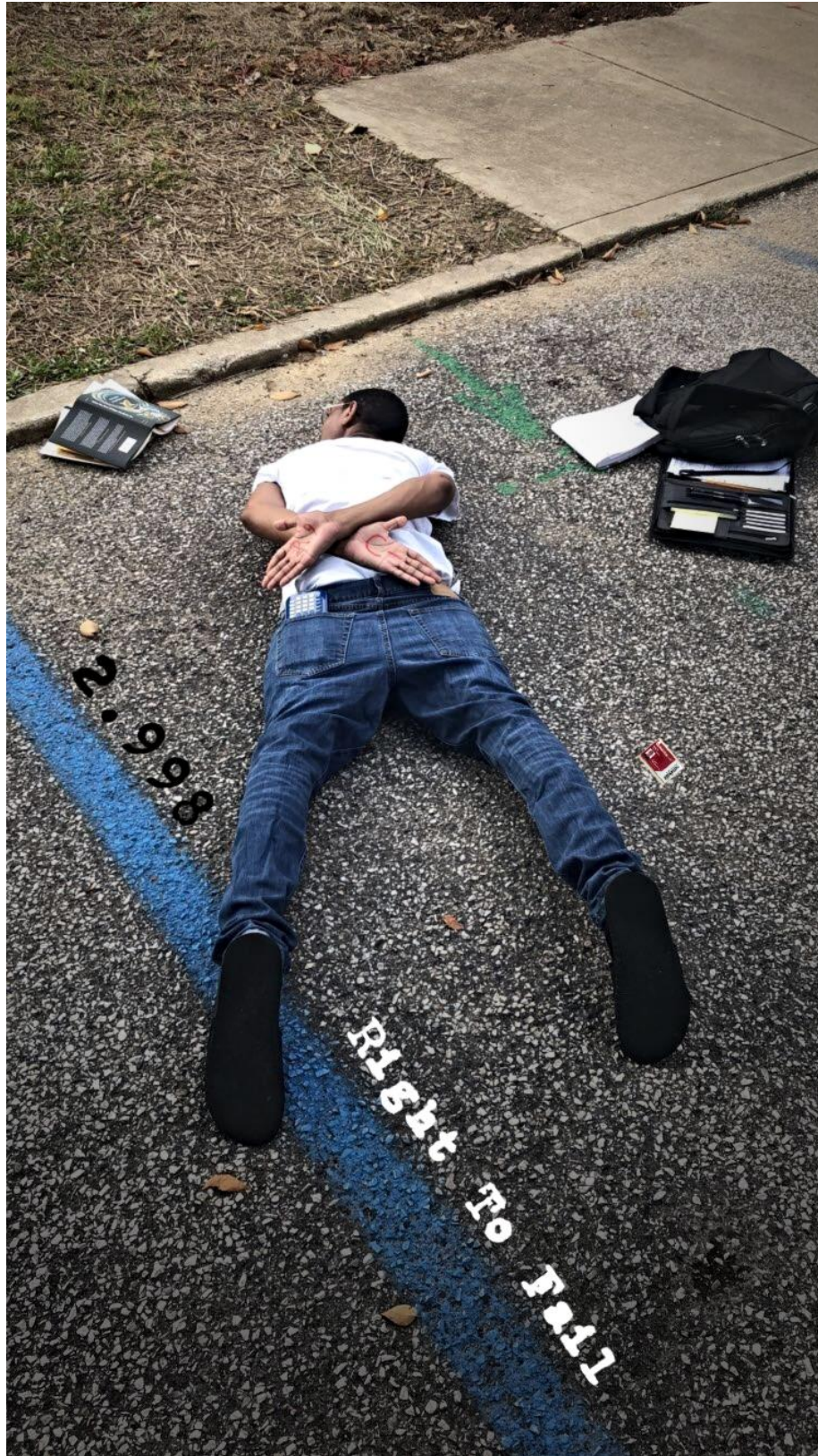
Table 1: Characteristics of a Grade (Quinn, 2013, p. 6)

Table 1: Characteristics of a Grade

Type of Information	Topic of Information	Context for Information
<i>"A grade is a _____ of _____ relative to _____."</i>		
<i>A grade is a/an...</i>	<i>Of...</i>	<i>Relative to...</i>
Quantification	A student's learning	A standard
Symbol	A student's skill level at a certain time	A student's peers within a class, school, grade, or age level in a particular region
Description	A student's average skill level over a period of time	A student's starting point
Evaluation	A student's performance on an individual assessment task	All other possible outcomes
Ranking	A student's performance on a number of assessment tasks	All other possible outcomes
	A student's progress over a certain period of time.	

Appendix I: Photovoice Images





Appendix II: Photovoice documents

Document 1:

SHOWED : 1

Task: Using the space below, explore your images (data sources) further.

Photovoice Image :	1 - Can You See Me?
<p>S</p> <p>What do you <u>see</u> here? (using bullets)</p> <p>What is the connection between this image and your readings from our course? Using the points above, draft a summary statement of the image.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is an African-American male standing well dressed. The male's hands seem to be free. There is an Indiana University Logo and name at the top left hand corner. There is a crimson red number in a cream rectangle covering the eyes of the male. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The number is 3.338
<p>H</p> <p>What is really happening here (from your perspective as a photographer; from assigned readings; from the broader literature on your topic)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Here is a well-dressed student who attends IU Bloomington. The crimson number displayed represents his current GPA at said institution. However, the number is covering his eyes. Hence, an issue arises. Here is an achieving student that cannot see what is right in front of him. He cannot see anything but the value of his GPA. Likewise, the viewer can hardly identify this individual. The viewer, the father, the professor, the scholarship committee all see the same thing; the number. This image elucidates to an idea that many students and even family members believe to be true: your gpa, your rank, and your honors, are the greatest determinants of your identity and self-image.
<p>O</p> <p>How does this relate to <u>our</u> lives (yours as a college student; others who attend Indiana University)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This image illustrates an idea that many (if not all) student believe to be truthful. One's ranking and grade point average are the largest contributing factors to one's identity or how one is viewed in the scholastic world. It is because of this idea that many students hold their GPA in such high regard as to make it apart of who they are as individuals. The GPA is a numerical value that provides worth and functionality. It demonstrates skill and mastery. However, it is a numerical value that standardizes personality. It aims to rank it and structure it to fit within a parameter of 1 to 4.
<p>W</p> <p>Why does this problem or strength exist on our campus? In higher education settings?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We as students will identify with elements that match our self-interests and future success. Therefore, if the society deems a high GPA as successful and the greatest means to achieving our goals, then we as students will identify with a high GPA more than anything. In doing this, however, we as rational beings will forfeit the elements that are not required to achieve that high GPA. This includes deep learning, expression of interests, and flat-out fulfillment of day to day pleasures. As a result, the development of our personality and how we view ourselves begin to be structured around achieving academic success and reaching those end goals.
<p>E</p> <p>How can we become <u>e</u>mpowered about this issue? (from your perspective; from your course readings; from the literature)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If we avoided becoming a number in a cell, then we can avoid becoming a number on a campus. If stress is defined as the body's way of responding to any kind of demand and we determine the demands in our lives, then we can control stress. Why should post-secondary education be dreadful? This is another phase in our life and another chapter in our story. We will never get this time back so it is best that we use it wisely and enjoy each moment along the way.
<p>D</p> <p>What can we <u>d</u>o about it?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We can redefine what it means to have a post-secondary education. We can redefine what the essence of learning should be. Provide the perspective and the reality that grades are not the sole determinate of success. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide the perspective that success and failure are relative terms: meaning that both will vary from student to student. Provide the perspective that learning on campus IS a life being well spent already. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Your life does not begin after your next goal, your life begins after your next breath. So live in the moment and enjoy the journey to your next destination.

Document 2:

SHOWED : 2

Task: Using the space below, explore your images (data sources) further.

Photovoice Image :	2 - Right To Fail
<p>S</p> <p>What do you <u>see</u> here? (using bullets)</p> <p>What is the connection between this image and your readings from our course? Using the points above, draft a summary statement of the image.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is an African-American male getting ground arrested. There is a book-bag with notebooks and pad-folio falling out. There is a book thrown to the side of the curve. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The male is looking towards the book. There is a calculator in the male's back left pocket. There is an IU Bloomington student ID tossed to the right side of the male. There is a red (C -) written on the left palm of the male. There is a black (seemingly spray painted) number on the pavement : 2.998 There is a white (seemingly spray painted) phrase on the pavement : <i>Right to Fail</i>
<p>H</p> <p>What is really happening here (from your perspective as a photographer; from assigned readings; from the broader literature on your topic)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Here is an IU Bloomington student that failed to meet the standards set by the community of the scholars. And like any good system, this one will punish and arrest those who do not meet the standards set for achieving students. No matter what he might know or have learned. No matter the context of his story nor his perspective. No matter what he could've been tomorrow. What is shown here is an image that demonstrates the convicting nature and absolute law of grades and grade point averages as a determinate of success as a student.
<p>O</p> <p>How does this relate to <u>our</u> lives (yours as a college student; others who attend Indiana University)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This image relates to the commonly morphed idea students have about the purpose of post-secondary education and what it means to be unsuccessful. This image elucidates how we picture ourselves and foreshadows what will become of us if we do not receive the highest of honors and recognition. But what many students fail to realize, is that as we put constant stress and worry towards grades and GPA's, we become more and more constricted in our actual learning and critical thinking. In other words, as we avoid falling to the civil system by attending college, we soon fall to the schooling system by becoming fixed minded.
<p>W</p> <p>Why does this problem or strength exist on our campus? In higher education settings?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This problem exists because of many influencing factors that are initiated and developed long before we even reach campus. There is a system set at the elementary level that rewards high marks with recognition and punishes low marks with less opportunities. There is a community of both family and faculty that praise perfect scores louder than deep learning. The repetition of such things result in a conversion from learning to conditioning. Thus, instead of the acquisition of knowledge we seek after only recognition and greater honors in order to reestablish our purpose. To put it bluntly, we were conditioned since 1st grade to seek high marks before all.
<p>E</p> <p>How can we become <u>e</u>mpowered about this issue? (from your perspective; from your course readings; from the literature)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If I managed to avoid that system, why should I fall for this one? In other words, if I was able to make it out of Gary, Indiana (or wherever else), avoid falling to the justice and civil systems, and actually make it to college, then why should I allow the schooling and grading system to hinder my goals also? Why did we escape those system only to fall for this one and still at the end of the day lose the time and the freedom to learn and achieve an education greater than a convict? This is our life. This is our education. And we fought hard to get here. So why let a number define me? Why become what the system wants me to be? Why become a systemic learner programmed to define my success as following the orders of another?
<p>D</p> <p>What can we <u>do</u> about it?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We can redefine what it means to have a post-secondary education by becoming knowledgeable about the grading system and how it functions. Provide the perspective and the reality that grades are not the sole determinate of success. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide the perspective that success and failure are relative terms: meaning that both will vary from student to student. Provide the perspective that learning on campus IS a life being well spent already. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Your life does not begin after your next goal, your life begins after your next breath. So live in the moment and enjoy the journey to your next destination.